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Part II, Improving Wikipedia: Technique and Strategy For China Folk

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Part II, Improving Wikipedia: Technique and Strategy For China Folk

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By Charles W. Hayford

How do we improve the coverage, reliability, and balance for China? With all the objections listed in my previous post, in the end, clearly we can’t achieve perfection, only make improvements. If you are already participating, you have doubtless come to terms with the culture of the natives; if you now join, remember to respect our perhaps outlandish ways. Like members of any other cult(ure), we have to live with each other. Some Wikipedians are nuts, some are smart and generous, most are trying to be useful, some are all of the above. Wikipedia enthusiasts simply accept that the project is a work in progress – the monkeys are still typing.

First a quick reminder on using it, and, for those of you who are teachers, how to get your students to use it without getting burned. Luckily, Wikipedians are documentative. The article “Reseaching With Wikipedia” lays out most of the do’s and don’t’s. The summary at the head of the article puts it in a nutshell: “You should not use only Wikipedia for primary research (unless you are writing a paper about Wikipedia).” The section on Tips brings together a lot of information.

Teachers will find Wikipedia an inexhaustible source of "teachable moments." Strange Facts in the History Classroom: Or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Wiki(pedia) by Christopher Miller (American Historical Association Perspectives May 2007) claims that what is “most troubling about the ‘anti-Wiki’ movement is that it tends to single out Wikipedia for being an online source rather than for being an encyclopedia.”

General issue articles are not reliably reliable, especially those which are the least bit controversial, but finding the story behind an article can give you a good historiographical workout. Teachers may want to develop exercises using the History and Discussion pages as outlined in "How to Read an Article History." (There is a tool which compiles Page History Statistics, but I’m not sure why you would want to know.) Reading the Revision History or Discussion pages (click the tab at the top of the article page) is like being down in the country listening to the neighbors on the shared telephone line, or maybe being in divorce court. Analyzing the discussions and revisions for controversial articles would be a good student course assignment.

Then if you don’t like what the article says, why just change it!

You do not have to create a User Account in order to edit (although you do have to register in order to create an article), but registering is free, takes less time than to pledge to National Public Radio, and creates your User Page, Talk Page, Contributions, and Watchlist.

The User and Talk Pages keep track of your contributions, keep links to tools and useful pages, and send and receive communications anonymously (choose a username which won’t blow your cover – this may prove useful before you know it). Your Watchlist keeps track of changes made on articles you specify (to add to your Watchlist, click the “watch” tab at the top of an article). Watchlist link takes you to the article or its History page. You can “undo” edits, though it is courteous and prudent to explain why on the Discussion Page. Deleting “Angela is a slut” from the article on the Kangxi Emperor, however, won’t need much defense.

At this point, sometimes things get rough and tumble. After making self-evidently brilliant improvements in one particular article, my Talk Page sprouted a note thanking me for my interest and suggesting that I use my talents elsewhere. My changes were “undo’d.” I could have reverted the changes, but after three reverts you find yourself in an Edit War, not a recreational experience. Wikipedia provides for adjudication, but this is even less recreational, so generally people just talk and talk and talk. And talk. This is how the Committee on Horses came up with the nifty design for a camel.
Creating an article is slightly daunting but don’t be shy — if it required special talent, there wouldn’t be 2.2 million of them. The directions are clear and Wikipedians are aggressively helpful. Start with “Who Writes Wikipedia” or maybe “Tutorial” or How to Edit a Page and you’ll fly away.

Wikipedia’s “Policies and Guidelines” are simple, though sometimes hard to define or enforce:

- **NPOV (Neutral Point of View):** “All Wikipedia articles and other encyclopedic content must be written from a neutral point of view, representing significant views fairly, proportionately, and without bias.”

- **No original research:** “Articles may not contain any new analysis or synthesis of published material that serves to advance a position not clearly advanced by the sources.” This may seem strange, but it actually makes good sense to require that articles be based on the consensus of published scholarship, not somebody’s interpretation. You see the problem already....

- **Verifiability:** The test is not whether or not the material is true, which is hard to establish, but that “material challenged or likely to be challenged, and all quotations, must be attributed to a reliable, published source.”

The guidelines ask that articles be well written, proportionate in length to the subject, and comprehensible to the ordinary reader. This is an area where the need is greatest.

How do you start? Just pick a topic and find an article. There will be links to related articles. Then use your judgment to prune and balance.

Here are some possible chores for volunteers:

- WikiProjects have undefined responsibilities and power which is only nominal, since they have no more rights than you or your dog. WikiProject China has a list of Participants (which you can join); notice and discussion boards; featured and good content articles. Other projects include articles with Chinese or Asian content, such as War, Film, etc. etc.

- The China Assessment page explains how to nominate articles for honors or for revision.

- **Cleanup:** everything from grammar to well, you name it. See the Manual of Style.

- Some articles are stubs, which need expansion. Others are disproportionately long, but it seems a shame to shrink them. For instance, Wang Mang runs roughly 8,000 words. Is that proportionate? Somebody thought so and who am I to say? But what will a student in my Chinese Civ. class get from it?

Maybe your job would be to seek articles and redo the opening paragraphs to make them into usable summaries.

- Another area for improvement is whether the links lead to articles which are helpful. Neither the article on the film “Everlasting Regret” nor on Wang Anyi, author of the novel on which the film is based, mention that there is a poem by that name, though the article on Bai Juyi (which is only three paragraphs long!) does mention “Song of Eternal Sorrow.” There are many easily fixed holes of this sort.

- “Further References” and “Further Reading.” To my mind, each article should have a short, balanced list of books and articles, with short annotations to guide reading – in English, please, as references in other languages can be found by clicking into the Wikipedia for that language. A rule of thumb might be perhaps one reference for each two or three paragraphs.

- Many articles have strange or inadequate footnotes. Some are marked “This article needs references,” but there are many more in extreme need.
Finally, here are reminders and some more handy features to keep in mind:

- Wikipedias in other languages (linked in the lefthand column of the article) may have fuller or better shaped coverage. For instance, the French article on "Tibet."
- If you need the Chinese translation of a current or tricky term, find an English Wikipedia article using it, then click to go to the Chinese version.
- **Wikipedia:Tools:** This page lists tools, categorized by browser you use. You can add them to your TalkPage to automate or simplify editing, give you information about articles (page history, number of edits, number of visits, links in and out, etc.), and perform other tasks which are not necessarily necessary. On your Wikipedia User Preference page, you can change the way articles and editing pages are displayed and add editing tools.
- "Traffic stats" is one of the tools, but you can’t view it unless you’re signed in and have added it to your tool box. Do not use it unless you are ready to be shocked: "Mao Zedong," for instance, was viewed more than 175,000 times in September 2008, ranking it in the top 800 articles.
- The Firefox browser, and I imagine others, has a search box which you can set to find Wikipedia articles. If you’d like to search for text, then...
- **Google search engine:** This is amazing. Google’s specialized engine will miraculously search the whole body of Wikipedia text to find, for instance, all mentions of a particular book, uses of a particular word or term, or your name in some article where you hadn’t thought to look. Very useful for finding where information is tucked away.
- "Portals" make browsing easier, and, though I hardly use them myself, it is possible to create them. **China Portal** lists many categories, some of which have dozens of articles and some of which are unpopulated. **Christianity in China** is an example of a specialized portal.
- And of course there has to be an independent discussion forum: **Wikipedia Review**, which has Boards for General Discussion, Metadiscussion, Articles, Wikipedia in the Media, a list of blogs concerning Wikipedia, etc. & etc.
- **WikiScanner**, which we probably will not need, gathers information on anonymous edits in order to see what organizations the edits are coming from.
- Sample articles which are listed as needing expansion include or are marked with balloons asking for improvement: "Pearl Buck," "Cultural Revolution," "ZhangYimou," "T.V. Soong," "Qingming Shanghe tu, Tang poetry, Bashidang, Chang Da-chien, China National Ethnic Song and Dance Ensemble, Chinese traditional religion, Chau Ju-kua, Linfen." You can also look at Mandarin (Bureaucrats), History of East Asia, and ... well, you take it from here!

I would like to thank Alan Baumler, Kate Merkel-Hess, Konrad Lawson, Ray Lum, and a friend who wishes to be anonymous for their suggestions.

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The Editors of China Beat and Frog In A Well (where Charles Hayford blogs regularly) invite comments, examples, experiences, pointers, and suggestions.